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Review of *Disability Works: Performance After Rehabilitation* by Patrick McKelvey (New York University Press)

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ABSTRACT In *Disability Works: Performance After Rehabilitation*, Patrick McKelvey traces the "confluences and contradictions" at play in disabled performance groups' relationships to the US government's vocational rehabilitation programs in the mid- to late-twentieth century. Grounding theatrical performance as an embodied display of and resistance to rehabilitation, McKelvey weaves together performance studies and disability studies to complicate common narratives of disability rights history. In doing so, this book provides a basis for future work that may emerge at the nexus of performance, disability, and history.

KEYWORDS disability studies, history, labor, performance, rehabilitation, rights

Disability Works: Performance After Rehabilitation. By Patrick McKelvey. New York, NY: New York University Press, 2024, 331 pp. (paperback) ISBN 978-1-4798-2487-8. US List: $32.00.

Just as vocational rehabilitation programs of the postwar United States proliferated "a new itinerary for what disability might come to mean," Patrick McKelvey's *Disability Works: Performance After Rehabilitation* offers a thoughtful new line of inquiry for the field of disability performance studies (10). Centering his work within the field of disability and performance studies, McKelvey makes an archival turn to retrace how "rehabilitation, as both policy and cultural

paradigm, simultaneously structured and was structured by theatrical contests over the role of compulsory labor as the basis of disabled citizenship" (5).

Exploring the interactions between disabled performance groups and rehabilitation services in the United States leading up to the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990, McKelvey proposes that an in-depth analysis of disability performance in this era complicates and disrupts current notions of disability history and activism. Urging disability and performance studies to take a turn toward the archive, McKelvey focuses on historical theatrical performance to highlight several innately crip modes of existence within the height of vocational rehabilitation's dominance in disability rights. Taking up theatrical performance specifically, McKelvey highlights how disabled performance was not limited to the stage. Vocational rehabilitation's methods of "preparing disabled people for the workforce, both in and beyond theatre, through iterative, embodied, mimetic practices" aimed to enforce "proper, economically productive middle-class norms" within disabled communities (6). *Disability Works* extends the field of disability performance studies through an intimate analysis of historical theatrical performance organizations to complicate narratives of disabled activism in the second half of the twentieth century, showing that "vocational rehabilitation took place *as* performance and required a broad array of theatrical practices and institutions to accomplish its goals" (16, emphasis in original).

Introducing "disability works" as "the performance institutions and practices that promulgated labor as either an aspiration for or a problem within disability policy and activism," McKelvey illustrates the complex negotiations of labor's role within disability rights (17–18). As McKelvey shows throughout this book, while vocational rehabilitation programs attempted to imagine new labor forces within disabled communities, disabled activists and performers both endorsed and contested this locating of proper citizenship within the framework of labor. Above

all, *Disability Works* speaks to the "confluences and contradictions" present within disabled performance works of the mid- to late-twentieth century (18).

Each chapter studies a different performance organization's relationship to rehabilitation and disabled activism, archiving various performance organizations' histories chronologically from the postwar period to the passing of the ADA. For McKelvey, performance not only informs disability history but complicates our narratives of such a history. McKelvey separates his work from others in the field by focusing on performance organizations' relations to the vocational rehabilitation machine that dominated this era's discussions of disability rights. As historians of disability have begun to question the progress narrative of the disability rights movement, McKelvey centers this questioning within the realm of performance.

Beginning in chapter 1 with Plays for Living and the Office for Vocational Rehabilitation, McKelvey investigates how rehabilitation programs, playwrights, and those involved in Plays for Living negotiated the narratives present in disabled performances. This chapter explores the burgeoning vocational rehabilitation programs in the United States and their initial excursions into performance within the 1950s and 1960s. From the beginning, McKelvey highlights the simultaneous friction and coherence between disabled performance and rehabilitation in an era when disabled communities began to find themselves in the spotlight of American debates over independence and interdependence.

The next organization McKelvey analyzes is the National Theatre for the Deaf (NTD) from 1966 to 1978, examining how the NTD incorporated rehabilitation narratives into its work. Chapter 2 shows how the NTD emphasized rehabilitation strategies sponsored by the government and the employment prospects of disabled individuals, especially those within the Deaf community. This chapter begins to introduce the interconnectedness that was perceived between disability and Blackness in the United States, a legacy that escalated through rehabilitation

programs. The legacy of such a connection, in which white vocational rehabilitation with its focus on independence and the growing labor force was contrasted to Black public assistance programs that supposedly "drained the nation's coffers," weaves itself through the narratives McKelvey draws out throughout the book (93).

The friction between adhering to rehabilitative structures and imagining new ways of viewing disability becomes most apparent in McKelvey's third chapter, in which he highlights the legacy and work of disabled playwright Ron Whyte and the National Task Force for Disability and the Arts. McKelvey explores how Whyte utilized government funding for disabled performance works to employ disabled survival strategies and imagine new structures to care for disabled communities. This chapter calls attention to the ways disabled performers were able to create spaces of imagining otherwise *within* the structures of rehabilitation programs and the funding they provided.

Following the relationship between Ron Whyte and Gregory Battcock from 1972 to 1977 through the form of letters written between the two, chapter 4 of *Disability Works* introduces the term "bureaucratic drag" to describe both the violence of administrative delays and how crip performance was able to theatricalize these same bureaucratic processes. As a "configuration of crip time," "bureaucratic drag" as both "an obstacle to and a strategy for disability organizing and performance on and against work" becomes a major intervention of *Disability Works* (144). McKelvey shows how the "links between bureaucracy and failure" were theatricalized through this practice of bureaucratic drag (166).

Returning to more traditionally defined theatrical performance, chapter 5 shows how the National Theatre Workshop for the Handicapped emphasized Stanislavskian acting as both a form of rehabilitation for employment and as a response to the deindustrialization of the United States in the mid- to late-1980s. Bringing together perceptions of labor and rest through performances of camp in

a time of industrial change in America, McKelvey presents disability theatre as "heir to the not-entirely-compliant legacy of the queer labor of camp performance," which itself offered "a glimpse of performance *after rehabilitation* in both senses, within rehabilitation's grasp but never fully acquiescing to its demands" (209, emphasis in original). McKelvey's bringing together of camp performance and disability theatre uniquely punctuates *Disability Works*'s ability to speak across fields.

In his final chapter, McKelvey takes up Alvin Ailey's New Visions Dance Project as a form of "rehabilitative redress," a resistance to the continual debilitation of African American communities in America that existed within a "crip alternative" to the more mainstream accounts of rehabilitation in the 1980s (218). Ailey's NVDP exemplified a "rehabilitative redress" that both worked within existing structures to center awareness of ongoing anti-Black debilitation and imagined new structures which resist both normative and racialized understandings of health and autonomy (219). This framing countered the "rehabilitative individualism" that prospered under the Reagan administration, in which funding for projects such as public transportation was cut, and an emphasis began to be placed on one's individual human capital as the preferred mode to achieve access.

McKelvey's sites of analysis span the mid- to late-twentieth century, a historical moment in which disability rights movements exploded across the United States. While this book does not focus on the broader disability rights movement that took root in America during the 1960s and 70s, what would it mean for future studies of this kind to center the social activism surrounding disability at this time? Given the rapidly changing social landscape of post-World War II America, as activists ignited causes around a variety of issues, how could future work on disabled performance question the relationships between these performance-based narratives of rehabilitation and the surrounding activism occurring around disability rights? McKelvey provides an insightful expansion of current scholarship on disabled performance during this period without claiming to be the final word

on the matter. In doing so, this work provides a basis for future work that may emerge at the nexus of performance, disability, and history.

While the field of disability studies, and even more specifically that of disability history, continues to expand, it will prove fruitful to continue to expand the horizons and interconnections of disability studies with other fields. McKelvey's *Disability Works: Performance After Rehabilitation* is an adept example of these expansive horizons. This rigorous study of what McKelvey calls "stagecraft and statecraft" proves the complexity of the relationship between the two (36).

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Travis York is a PhD student in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at the Ohio State University. They have previously received a MA in Women and Gender Studies from the University of Toronto and a BA in History from Princeton University. Their research centers around historical representations of disability in relation to the figure of the human, specifically within the realm of masculinity. Broadly focusing on the second half of the twentieth century, their scholarship questions how disability has historically been constructed as a social category.

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